Journal of Research on Leadership Education

June 2009, Volume 4, Issue 1

International Response Essay

Shall our leadership preparation programs be focused on proactive leadership for social justice? A rejoinder to Jean-Marie, Normore, and Brooks

Izhar Oplatka
Tel Aviv University

A dominant conjecture underlying the literature about leadership for social justice brought up in Jean-Marie, Normore, and Brooks' (2009) paper suggests that leadership preparation programs (LPPs) need to prepare school leaders to promote a broader and deeper understanding of social justice, democracy, and equity, as well as to struggle with forms of racial and religious discrimination. Accordingly, the authors examine whether or not LPPs are committed to, and capable of, preparing school leaders to think globally and act courageously about social justice.

Beyond the ponderings about contextual influences in "leadership for social justice" (e.g., is this kind of LPP suitable for every society on the earth?), I would like to revisit the 'calls' for incorporating social justice contents into LPPs from two different standpoints. The first, an epistemological view, deals with educational administration as a field of study and raises questions regarding its knowledgebase and scholarly boundaries (for more details see Oplatka, 2009). The second, the career stage view, divides a leader's career cycle into distinguished stages (e.g., Ribbins, 1999), addressing our attention to aspiring and newly appointed educational leaders' particular constraints and experiences.

Should educational administration scholars be involved in social justice?

Historical accounts of the educational administration field (e.g., Callahan, 1962; Culbertson, 1988) have seen the last quarter of the nineteenth century as the beginning of educational administration as a profession and later on as a field of study in universities. The search for efficiency in education encouraged many educators to participate in LPPs, leading in later years to the institutionalization of educational administration programs and departments. Thus, the academic institutionalization of the LPP was accompanied by the establishment of an

academic field whose members (i.e., scholars) had to produce the knowledge base for these programs.

For many years, however, educational administration scholars have focused on managerial skills, organizational aspects and related contents intended to provide aspiring leaders with theoretical and applied knowledge necessary for holding leadership positions. Under these circumstances, Jean-Marie et al.'s call to provide curricula that sheds light on and interrogate notions of social justice, democracy, equity and diversity in LPPs raises some ponderings about the intellectual boundaries of the educational administration field, as well as into its members' distinguished expertise.

If we accept the authors' claims for including contents of social justice in our LPPs, then one may wonder about the intellectual boundaries of our knowledge base in educational administration. As *social justice* is a broad issue explored in many disciplines, it means, in my view, the expansion of our field's scholarly boundaries far beyond its core content, i.e., management, leadership and organization of schools (and similar educational institutions). This expansion may raise some questions regarding our field such as: is this the purpose of the field to explore any knowledge? Is social justice is a core content in our field? Who determines the nature of our knowledge base? What is our knowledge base? Are we, the field's members, committed to instruct and deliver every fashionable topic? If the answer is positive, would we also include *racist education* in LPPs in case this topic was favored by many citizens or policy makers? I doubt it.

There is always the hazard that the inclusion of endless areas of study in our field will require many spheres of expertise to the point that we will no longer be able to communicate with each other and the field will dismantle into many sub-fields with almost no interconnection among them. Put simply, educational administration scholars cannot be experts in a host of theories (e.g., critical theory, queer theory and feminist post-structural theory) or contents (can we also be experts of curriculum development or instruction and learning?), as advocates of leadership for social justice expect. Besides, who determines the priority in LPP's curriculum – citizens, policy-makers, or virtually the field's members whose expertise is to train and develop both aspiring and current educational leaders? Even though an academic knowledge is a process socially constructed, our field's knowledge must not be devised mainly by social trends and political upheavals. Otherwise, its academic status might be at risk.

After all, Jean-Marie et al also maintain that the term *social justice* is an elusive construct, politically loaded, and subject to numerous interpretations. This, in turn, makes me feel that its relevancy to an academic field is questioned; how can we produce an empirical knowledge about this vague concept? Why should we advocate these concepts in our LPPs while we do not have enough empirical knowledge to support its contribution to and positive implications for the professional

development of educational leaders? How can field members, then, call for a leadership style whose contribution to the schooling process is still in shadow? If they do, and they refrain from "bystanderism" (a term mentioned in Jean-Marie et al.'s paper), they seem to be more like protagonists of a certain ideology rather than researchers whose main task is to understand the reality rather than re-creating it consistently.

In other words, the claim that educational leaders have a moral and social obligation to foster equitable school practices, processes, and outcomes for learners of different racial, socioeconomic, gender, cultural disability, and sexual orientation backgrounds is underpinned by current cultural scripts in the western world, not necessarily by robust empirical investigations. This is a normative issue, not an empirical (scientific) one. An academic field, however, ought to be first and foremost empirical-focused.

Let us stretch the point and take this argument one stage further. As *social justice* is a normative issue, the question coming up in my mind is whether we, the field members who teach in LPPs, are allowed and legitimated to encourage aspiring leaders to alter social contexts, let alone to prepare them to liberate their "oppressed students," as some of the writers cited by Jean-Marie et al. have suggested. No doubt, aspiring leaders ought to be exposed to contents and studies about leadership for social justice, but in no way can their lecturers hold the political role as protagonists of value-based issues, and *social justice* is such an issue. An academic field member is responsible for analyzing and studying the ideology (e.g., its strengths, weaknesses, contradictions, applicability), not for distributing a revolutionary message systematically and purposefully.

Note, however, that in no way I claim for not teaching social justice and related contents in our LPPs. In a time of multiculturalism, equity and equality are attributes our future educational leaders need to increase their awareness as the authors suggest. But, and this is a big but, the emphasis should be on consciousness-building, critical debates, or empirical orientations rather than on pro-active involvement of the leaders in transforming schools into a certain form underpinned by social and political movements. Likewise, if we choose to focus on one (fashionable?) ideology we pay less attention to other important contents in the LPP level. But the "other contents" are very important for aspiring leaders' professional development, and that brings me to question newly appointed leaders' ability to practice leadership for social justice in their early career stage.

Can a prospective principal grasp the idea of leadership for social justice?

To this point, I claimed for not including revolutionary contents in LPPs for epistemological and ethical reasons. Yet, from the career stage standpoint, it is unlikely that newly appointed educational leaders will be able to transform their school into what is expected from them in regards to the literature about leadership for social justice. They simply have to achieve

acceptance, learn the school's culture, and overcome the insecurity of inexperience. In addition to this, their professional efficacy and self-concept are too low (Parkay et al., 1992; Ribbins, 2006) to enable them implement such revolutionary changes.

Besides, before entering the leadership position, the intern has no sufficient expertise to lead people and initiate changes, or a sense of what a managerial functioning is. How can an aspiring leader absorb the real meaning of leading for social justice before practicing the basic skills of managing organizations in their current forms? How could he or she develop a proactive strategy to grapple with racism or sexism when he or she has not yet been engaged in the basic tasks of management?

Jean-Marie et al cited Allen (2006) who asserted that professors need to reexamine how aspiring leaders are prepared to address the complexity of culture and schooling. Yet, in another place the authors found that aspiring leaders claimed little responsibility for promoting social justice, especially when social change challenged local norms. This is an unsurprising finding, given our knowledge about the overwhelming experiences of new leaders during their first years in post. How can aspiring principals be committed to ideas that are potentially in sharp contrast with local norms when they have, first, to gain legitimacy and acceptance in their school community?

Liberatory education attempts, in the authors' view, to empower learners to engage in critical dialogue that critiques and challenges oppressive social conditions nationally and globally and to envision and work towards a more just society. While this sort of education is very important, I doubt it is suitable for prospective leaders whose ability to make educational revolutions before understanding the practice of management itself is questioned. No matter how much effort educational administration professors put into establishing internships that support leadership for social justice, this content is based on abstract knowledge that is hard to grasp in pre-career stages. Furthermore, in order to be the architect and builder of a new social order in school, the new leader has to persuade upper middle-class parents to support notions of social justice when many of them nowadays advocate forms of education for excellence. But, how can he or she do so when his or her skills and experience of external relations are limited?

Perhaps, proactive contents of leadership for social justice are more appropriate for in-service leadership development programs. Leaders at later career stages have already established authority and high professional efficacy to enable them initiate and implement school changes more profoundly. They are ‘free’ to achieve ‘just’ schools and apply principles of social justice in the school. Those surrounding them (i.e., teachers, parents, constituencies) are more likely to support their educational visions and ideologies after they had already proved effectiveness and efficiency throughout their years in leadership. Besides, they probably have the tools to analyze social justice critically and constructively, which is

what brings me to mull over their ability to judge our academic contents and provide us with some illuminative suggestions regarding our field of study.

References

Callahan, R.E. (1962). *Education and the Cult of Efficiency*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Culbertson, J.A. (1988). A century's quest for a knowledge base. In N.J. Boyan (Ed.), *Handbook of research on educational administration* (pp. 3-26). New York: Longman.

Oplatka, I. (2009). The field of educational administration: An historical overview of scholarly attempts to recognize epistemological identities, meanings, and boundaries from 1960s onwards**.** *Journal of Educational Administration*, *47*(1), 8-35.

Parkay, F.W., Currie, G.D., & Rhodes, J.W. (1992). Professional socialization: a longitudinal study of first-time high school principals. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *28*(1), 43-75.

Ribbins, P. (1999). Understanding leadership: developing headteachers. In T. Bush, L. Bell, R. Bolam, R. Glatter, & P. Ribbins (Eds.), *Educational Management: Redefining Theory, Policy, Practice* (pp. 77-89). London: Paul Chapman Publishing.